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UNCLAS COLOMBO 001160

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA/INS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION UNP BEGINS MOVEMENT TO
GALVANIZE ITS VOTER BASE

REF: COLOMBO 01151

1. (U) Summary. On July 2 the Opposition United National Party kicked off a ten-day march to protest the high cost of living and demand presidential elections this year. Their movement, which began July 2 and will run through July 12, seems to be a campaign for future elections, be they presidential, parliamentary, or for the provincial councils. The march drew large support over its initial weekend, but crowds tapered off as the work week began. The protest continues with smaller numbers, with the UNP hoping for its biggest bang on the final day. End summary.

2. (U) On July 2, the opposition United National Party (UNP) began its Jana Bala Meheyuma, or People's Power Movement (Reftel) in the southern city of Dondra. The march is due to last until July 12. UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, accompanied by many UNP bigwigs, kicked off the movement by calling upon the United People's Front Alliance (UPFA) government to reduce the cost of living, find solutions to unemployment, and build a lasting peace. He also demanded that the President hold elections at the end of 2005. (Note. The Constitution permits the President two terms of six years each. The President called for early elections during her first term and began her second term five years after her first. According to the President's calculations, she can remain in power from twelve years from her initial election, which gives her until November 2006. However, her opponents maintain that the clock started when she began her current term in office in 1999, so elections must be held in November 2005. End note.)

3. (SBU) Press reports indicated that over 25,000 people participated on the movement's first day. Protesters marched from Dondra on the coastal road for three days. The number of protesters dwindled as they walked into their third day, but when the group concluded in Galle on July 4 and held a rally, a crowd of supporters attended. Wickremesinghe addressed that meeting as well, and announced that if he is elected President, he will revoke the requirement that no one build within the 100 meters of land from the coast that is now considered a tsunami buffer zone. He said that a presidential election is the only solution to the nation's problems. According to press reports, on the morning of July 5, only about 5000 people were continuing with the march. Nevertheless, organizers claim that the rally in Colombo on July 12 will draw one million people.

4. (SBU) On July 1 Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, Executive Director of the Center for Policy Alternatives, a prominent local think tank, told poloff he views the UNP's march to demand presidential elections in late 2005 as pointless political grand-standing. Observing that the Election Commissioner alone has the authority to set the time frames for elections, Saravanamuttu questioned the utility of "demanding" earlier polls from the President. The march is more likely an effort by the opposition party to galvanize its grassroots organization and to try to gauge its own popularity a year after its defeat in the 2004 general elections, he suggested.

5. (SBU) Comment. Despite UNP claims that the march is a general protest against the high cost of living, it seems evident that the UNP is beginning its campaign for any upcoming elections. The decrease in the number of protesters is probably due to the start of the work week. The number of participants will likely rise next weekend and drop off again afterward. The UNP should be able to gather a large crowd for the July 12 rally, but certainly nowhere near the one million they are projecting. End note.

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